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PARIS FOR WALLER, LONDON FOR TSOU

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SYRIAN ACTIVIST URGES U.S. TO LAY DOWN MARKERS
WITH SARG BEFORE ANY ENGAGEMENT

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Recently released Damascus Spring detainee Fawwaz Tello asserted in a recent meeting with Poloff that despite the ongoing Israel-Hizballah conflict, the SARG must not be allowed to cross "red lines" in its ongoing crackdown against Syrian human rights and civil society activists. The SARG might be tempted, for example, to condemn jailed Syrian activist Kamal Labwani to death or to issue extreme prison sentences to other jailed activists such as Syrian intellectual Michel Kilo or human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni, Tello said. The U.S. should condition any negotiations with the SARG, by requiring a gesture of good faith linked to the internal situation, such as the release of prominent activists, Tello asserted. Labwani's wife made a similar point in a conversation before her husband's July 31 court appearance, asking that any USG discussions with the SARG include the plight of her husband and other activists.

¶2. (C) Tello, who spent 4.5 years in prison as a "Damascus Spring" detainee before his January release, likened Israeli actions against Hizballah as akin to cutting the tail off of a snake. The head is in Iran and Syria, he said. The SARG manipulates Hizballah, just as it manipulates the perception of the level of extremists in Syria to strike fear in the heart of Western countries, Tello said. "I'm Muslim, Sunni, conservative, and I pray," Tello said. "But I'm not a fanatic, and I know that most other Syrian Muslims are like me."

¶3. (C) Tello alternated between calling for U.S. engagement with Syria and for getting rid of top regime leaders who are only concerned with their own survival. The Syrian regime is like a pyramid -- if you cut off the top, you could work with the rest, Tello said. He likened Syria to Romania under former dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, claiming that Syrian citizens will never rise up against their government until they are certain it is falling. In any event, reform in Syria will be long and slow, he said.

¶4. (C) Comment: Tello seemed overly optimistic about the ability of an external power to impose fundamental changes on the SARG. His comments, however, reflect a growing belief here that the U.S. will eventually engage with Syria and should use such a development to push for internal reform and to lay down a few key markers on human rights, including insisting on the release of Labwani, Kilo, Bunni, and the other signatories of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration.

¶5. (C) Comment Continued: It is notable that even in the midst of rising anti-American sentiment here in Damascus,

Tello agreed to this first meeting with Poloff, after meeting less than a handful of times with her predecessor. Despite rising anti-American sentiment here, the primary constraint on making and retaining contacts in Syria's civil society and the opposition in recent months remains SARG repression--especially aimed at those who signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration--rather than the current raw street emotions prompted by the Israel-Hizballah conflict. Many opposition and civil society figures here are far more skeptical of SARG intentions--and of its support for Hizballah--than Syrians in general and those anti-regime, pan-Arab nationalists who have been swept up in pro-Hizballah sentiments.

CORBIN